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ABSTRACT

Agriculture and the railroad were significant forces in the development of Suwannee County, Florida, formally created in 1858 but explored and settled beginning some 300 years earlier. Lumber and cotton caused an early 20th century boom in the county which soon saw the negative effects of both industries. The introduction of tobacco in the late 1920's caused an agricultural resurgence which has continued to the present. By 1970, Suwannee County had become a leading producer of chickens and tobacco. Economically, the county followed national trends in that there were fewer, larger farms in the 1970's than before. From 1950 to 1970 farm-based employment declined 31.7% but the steady increases in manufacturing, construction, and wholesale/retail trade indicated that those industries will grow in importance, thereby strengthening the county's economic base through diversification. Suwannee County leaders identified this economic potential as one of the county's main strengths but noted the need for recreational and educational improvements to support an expanding economic base. By 1970 non-agricultural employment had become a more important source of income but personal income for county residents was still far below the state average. County population growth statistics were consistent with those for the state of Florida. (SB)

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A Profile of Suwannee County, Florida *

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Preface

The following was developed as part of the Regional Project S-120 "Social Organization for Development in Rural Counties in the South." The project is being conducted in eight southern land-grant institutions and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico under the auspices of State Experiment Stations and the Cooperative State Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The general objective of the project is to better understand how rural counties organize and function to bring about social and economic development.

This paper provides a profile of one of the Florida counties studied, Suwannee County. A brief history of the county as well as its population and economic characteristics are examined. Moreover, local community leaders' perceptions of the county - the things liked and the things in need of improvement are discussed.

The History of Suwannee County

History notes that one of the first persons to roam the area now known as Suwannee County was the famed explorer Hernando DeSoto. Having landed a party in the Tampa Bay area in 1539, DeSoto and his men moved north along ancient Indian trails to the Suwannee County area. It is recorded that they were in search of "cities of gold."

Several Spaniards, Frenchmen, Englishmen, and Americans traveled the area over the next 280 years. Spanish Franciscan friars established Indian missions in the county nearly 100 years following DeSoto's entry. These missions prospered until English settlers from colonies to the north invaded the area in 1700. Settlers in South Georgia who crossed the Suwannee County area returned home to tell stories of the beautiful lands bordering the river which the Spaniards had named the San Juan de Guacara. It is believed that the word Suwannee came into being from an improper enunciation of the words San Juan - which became Sawanny - and subsequently Suwannee.

When the United States eventually purchased Florida from Spain in 1821, General Andrew Jackson became designated Military Governor and was given the charge of setting up a government. On the basis of his decision, two counties were formed (Escambia and St. Johns) with the Suwannee River serving as the dividing line. In the following year, Duval County was established encompassing all of present Suwannee County. In 1824, another county was created in in Florida and named Alachua. It included in its boundaries the area of Suwannee County.

The continued influx of settlers to the north central Florida area resulted in the establishment of another county - Columbia - in 1832. It was to take in the present day area of Suwannee County. Census reports indicate that by 1840, some 23 families were residing in the Suwannee County area. This is somewhat surprising in light of the Seminole Indian Wars which were being fought in this general vicinity since 1835.

It was not until December 21, 1958 that the legislature gave approval for the creation of Suwannee County. At the time of its establishment, the county had a population of approximately 2,000 including slaves. By 1860, it had increased to 2,303 with 1,467 being whites and 836 being blacks.

As was the case for many Florida counties, railroads performed a key role in the development of the county. During the Civil War period, Confederate troops were in dire need of supplies from Florida. The inability to ship supplies via Florida's coastal ports resulted in the construction of a railroad from Dupont, Georgia to a railroad crossing in Suwannee County. This rail route provided a much needed outlet for the movement of supplies to the rest of the South.

The railroad juctions in Suwannee County eventually built up and became the county seat, Live Oak. The town apparently took its name from a solitary Live Oak Tree that grew by the railroad depot. It served to provide a shady rest area for both railroad workers and hunters.

Since its inception, Suwannee County's well-being has been heavily dependent upon agriculture. Live Oak, with its easy access to railroads, became an agricultural trade center. By 1870, there were some 195 farms representing nearly 12,000 acres of improved farmlands. In 1890, the number of farms had increased dramatically to 1,178 with an average size of 137 acres.

By the turn of the century, Suwannee County was experiencing a sizable economic boom. Both timber and cotton were doing well, providing families with a comfortable income level. By 1910, Suwannee County had become the most important lumber manufacturing center in the state. Moreover, it was the center of sea island cotton in the United States producing nearly 10% of that commodity in the world. Clearly, the first decade of the 19th century had been a prosperous one for Suwannee County.

From 1915 to 1920, the county population reached its peak, supported primarily by forestry and cotton. The 1920 Census Agriculture indicates that there were 2,570 farms and a population of nearly 20,000. However, a serious downturn occurred soon afterward. Cotton production began declining rapidly because of boll-weevil infestation. In addition, timber supplies became seriously depleted by the mid - 1920's. The effects were devastating; a decline of 33% in the number of farms by 1930 and out-migration by persons seeking employment opportunities elsewhere.

A resurgence in agriculture came about with the introduction of tobacco to Suwannee County in the latter part of the 1920's. Tobacco acreage increased steadily during the 1930's. Live Oak, the county seat, became the hub of tobacco activity in the County. It soon became Florida's largest tobacco market, a title it still holds today.

Topography and Geography

Suwannee County, located in north central Florida, takes its name from the Suwannee River, made famous by the 19th Century composer Stephen Foster. The river loops around the county, forming its northern, western and southern boundaries. The county encompasses a total land area of 686 square miles or approximately 429,000 acres.

The county's terrain is generally flat with elevations ranging from a low of 38 feet above sea level in the southern extremity to a high of 200 feet above sea level in the northeast. Some shallow depressions are in evidence in limited portions of the county.

The majority of the soil in the county is a sandy, light texture. Of the eight general soil types found in the county, only two are not sands.

The climate of Suwannee County is characterized by long, warm summers and relatively mild winters. Average summer temperatures range from 70° - 91° Fahrenheit, while winter temperatures generally range between 35° - 75° Fahrenheit. Freezing temperatures occur on an average of 15 days each winter. Precipitation varies significantly from one season to the next. Nearly half of the total annual rainfall occurs during the summer rainy season of June through September.

Demographic Profile

The information detailed in Table 1 indicates that Suwannee County's population decreased by nearly 12% between 1950-1960. The decline was due primarily to out-migration of young adults unable to procure jobs in the county. The population loss was in sharp contrast to the hefty increase registered by the State of Florida as a whole (+78.7%) over the same period of time. In the decade 1960 to 1970, the Suwannee County population experienced a slight increase of 4% from 14,961 to 15,559 persons. However, the population change of +21.6% between 1970-1976 is a clear indication that Suwannee County is in the midst of a healthy population growth comparable to that of the state in general (+25.9%).

Components of the county's population change are outlined in Table 2. In both the 1950 - 1960 and 1960 - 1970 intervals, the out-migration of persons exceeded the in-migration of new residents. Recent data indicate a clear reversal of this trend with nearly 81% of the 1970-1976 population expansion being directly attibutable to net migration. Like most counties in Florida, migration has become a key factor in the future growth of the county.

Consistent with the state pattern which indicates a larger share of Floridians residing in urban areas since 1950 (from 65.5% in 1950 to 80.5% in 1970), Suwannee County has had a proportional increase in its urban population over the same twenty-year period, from 23.9% in 1950 to 43.9% in 1970 (see Table 3). A profile of the age distribution of county residents indicates a continuing decline in the percentage of the population under 18 years of age (from 40.7% in 1950 to 32.6% in 1976) and a moderate proportional increase in the population 65 years old and over (from 7.8% in 1950 to 13.5% in 1976). A drop of 9.4% in the minority population was experienced in the 1950-1976 time span in Suwannee County, slightly higher than the -8.1% evidenced in Florida as a whole.

Economic Profile

The economy of Suwannee County remains highly dependent upon agriculture. Several local industries have a heavy dependence upon the agricultural commodities produced within the county. The central role of agriculture is highlighted in Table 4, which outlines the county's major agricultural products, their quantities, and the county's ranking relative to other Florida counties producing the same commodity.

TABLE 1: Population Growth Patterns of Suwannee County, 1950 - 1976

YEAR	Population	
	SUWANNEE COUNTY	FLORIDA
1950	16,986	2,771,305
1960	14,961	4,951,560
1970	15,559	6,791.418
1976	18,918	8,551,814
% CHANGE		
1950-1960	- 11.9%	78.7%
1960-1970	4.0%	37.2%
1970-1976	21.6%	25.9%

Sources: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population (1950, 1960, 1970). General Population Characteristics - Florida; Florida Statistical Abstract 1977, Ralph B. Thompson (ed.). Gainesville: University Presses of Florida.

TABLE 2: Components of Population Change in Suwannee County, 1950 - 1976.

TIME PERIOD	POPULATION CHANGE	Components of Change			
		NATURAL INCREASE		NET MIGRATION	
		NO.	%	NO.	%
1950-1960	-2025				
1960-1970	598	1438	240.5	-840	-140.5
1970-1976	3359	641	19.1	2718	80.9

Sources: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population (1950, 1960, 1970). General Population Characteristics - Florida; Florida Statistical Abstract 1977, Ralph B. Thompson (ed.). Gainesville: University Presses of Florida.

TABLE 3: General Population Characteristics of Suwannee County, 1950 - 1976

	TOTAL POPULATION	% URBAN	% RURAL	AGE DISTRIBUTION % Under 18	18-64	65+	RACIAL COMPOSITION % White	% Non-white
SUWANNEE								
1950	16,986	23.9	76.1	40.7	51.5	7.8	70.6	29.4
1960	14,961	43.7	56.3	39.3	50.0	10.7	72.8	27.2
1970	15,559	43.9	56.1	35.8	52.2	12.0	76.4	23.6
1976	18,918	NA	NA	32.6	53.9	13.5	80.0	20.0
FLORIDA								
1950	2,771,205	65.5	34.5	30.0	61.4	8.6	78.2	21.8
1960	4,951,560	73.9	26.1	34.0	54.8	11.2	82.0	18.0
1970	6,791.418	80.5	19.5	31.1	54.3	14.6	84.2	15.8
1976	8,551,814	NA	NA	27.2	56.1	16.7	86.3	13.7

NA = Not Available

Sources: U. S. Bureau of the Census. County and City Data Book, 1972; U. S. Bureau of the Census. General Population Characteristics; Florida Statistical Abstract, 1977, Ralph B. Thompson (ed.).

5.

Suwannee County is now the leading producer of broilers and meat-type chickens in Florida. This is an impressive accomplishment given that chicken raising on a commercial basis was first introduced to the county in the mid - 1960's after a major chicken processing plant located in the county. Suwannee County is second of 24 Florida counties in the production of tobacco. Tobacco remains the single largest revenue producer for the county as a whole. Table 4 further documents the county's leadership role in the production of several additional agriculture products (i.e., corn, sorghum grains, hogs and pigs). Recent estimates indicate that gross agricultural receipts total over $25 million in Suwannee County.

TABLE 4: Agricultural Production in Suwannee County.

Product	Unit of Sales	Rank Order Suwannee County Vs. Other Counties	Percent of Florida Prod.
Broilers & Meat - Type Chickens	7,212,371 *	1 of 27	22.0
Tobacco	4,662,042 lbs.	2 of 24	19.9
Corn	41,540 acres	1 of 57	14.0
Hogs and Pigs	41,748 *	3 of 67	12.0
Sorghum	1,236 acres	2 of 42	5.0
Pecans Wild and Seedlings	19,544 lbs.	6 of 22	8.0
Pecans Improved	28,016 lbs.	7 of 30	3.0
Peanuts	2,088,242 lbs.	8 of 28	2.7
Hay	1,653 acres	27 of 65	1.3
Soybean	1,799 acres	9 of 27	1.2
Catties and Calves	11,832 *	31 of 67	1.0
Vegetables	2,467 acres	16 of 67	1.0
Wheat	115 acres	7 of 20	0.4

* Number of Animals

Sources: Census of Agriculture, 1969. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Volume 1, Area Reports; part 29, section 1 and 2.

Consistent with the national trend, Suwannee County has been undergoing changes in the agricultural sector. Farms have become fewer in number and larger in size. Technological innovations have made large-scale commercial farming a reality. Consequently, non-agricultural employment has begun to assume a greater role in producing resident income.

TABLE 5: Industrial and Occupational Groupings in Suwannee County, 1950-1970

	Year		
	1950	1960	1970
TYPE OF INDUSTRY (%)			
Agriculture, Forestry	49.3%	30.1%	17.6%
Mining	0.0	2.6	3.0
Construction	2.8	6.0	7.2
Manufacturing	10.7	10.2	13.5
Transportation Services	2.7	2.2	2.3
Communications	0.4	1.6	2.4
Utilities & Sanitary Services	0.8	2.7	1.8
Wholesale and Retail Trade	12.5	16.7	19.0
Fin./Ins./Real Estate/Bus. Repairs	2.9	3.4	5.8
Personal Services	9.1	12.2	11.5
Education Services	3.6	4.5	8.8
Prof./Pub. Admin.	3.5	4.3	5.2
Other	1.7	3.4	1.9
OCCUPATION (%)			
Prof., Technical	5.3%	6.6%	9.3%
Manager, Admin.	7.0	8.3	7.4
Sales	4.4	6.2	6.8
Clerical	4.0	6.9	13.1
Craftsmen, Foremen	4.9	9.4	13.2
Operatives/Transport.	8.5	12.8	13.6
Non-Farm Laborers	7.3	6.3	5.0
Service Workers	4.1	6.6	11.1
Private Household Workers	4.3	6.2	4.1
Farmers, Managers, Laborers, Foremen	48.7	27.6	16.4
Others	1.5	3.1	0.0
TOTAL NUMBER EMPLOYED	6041	5105	5585

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census. General Social and Economic Characteristics

TABLE 6: Median Income and Incidence of Poverty in Suwannee County, 1950-1976

	Year		
	1950	1960	1970
Median Family Income	$1,281	$2,767	$5,903
% Below Poverty Level			
Families	NA	NA	27.9%
Households	NA	NA	35.9%
Persons	NA	NA	34.0%

Sources: U. S. Bureau of the Census. General Social and Economic Characteristics; U. S. Bureau of the Census. County and City Data Book, 1952, 1962, 1972.

NA = Not Available

TABLE 7: Principal Sources of Personal Income, Suwannee County

	Year		
	1965	1970	1975
Wages and Salary Disbursement	47.9%	58.4%	48.2%
Other Labor Income	2.0	2.8	3.3
Proprietor's Income	34.8	17.0	20.1
Dividends, Interest, Rent	4.7	7.5	9.4
Transfer Payments	10.5	14.4	19.0

Source: State of Florida, Division of Economic Development. Suwannee County Economic Data (April 1977).

The movement toward non-farm employment is supported by the data in Table 5. Labor force employment in the agriculture/forestry industry declined by 31.7% in the twenty-year period 1950 - 1970. At the same time steady increases were evident in the construction, manufacturing, wholesale/retail trade, and educational service industries.

The occupational characteristics of employed Suwannee County residents are fairly consistent with the industrial types outlined in Table 5. Only 16.4% of the employed work force in 1970 were farmers, farm managers, foremen or laborers, a drop of 32.3% since 1950. Strong advances were most apparent in the clerical, craftsmen/foremen, and service occupational categories over the twenty-year time span.

Median income for Suwannee County families in 1969 was $5,903, substantially lower than the state's $8,267 (see Table 6). The incidence of poverty was also quite different from the state average. The 27.9% of all families in Suwannee County living below poverty level in 1970 was more than double the Florida figure of 12.7%. Moreover, some 34% of all persons residing in the county were living in poverty, a sharp contrast to the state mean of 16.4%.

Table 7 shows the five principal sources of income for Suwannee County residents. Wages and salaries have remained the primary source of personal income since 1965. Proprietor's income, while still a sizable source of personal income for residents in 1975 (20.1%), was 14.7% lower than its 1965 figure. Transfer payments (i.e., social security, welfare) have increased steadily as a source of income, from 10.5% in 1965 to 19.0% in 1975.

As a general statement, it is clear that agricultural income will continue to perform a significant role in the economic health of Suwannee County. Although the number of persons employed in the agricultural sector will continue to decline, the overall input of agriculture will remain strong. Wholesale and retail trade, construction and manufacturing will assume a greater role in producing resident income. Consequently, the diversification of county's economic base will solidify its economic well-being for years to come.

Local Leaderships' Present Perceptions of Suwannee County

In July 1977, thirty-six individuals identified as community leaders were interviewed as part of the S-120 Regional Project. A major portion of the interview was directed at discerning the county leaderships' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the county, that is, the nature of the county's attractions and shortcomings. The results of these discussions are reported below.

The methodology employed in the identification of the local leadership involved three steps:

1) Newspapers, minutes of county commissioners' meetings, and minutes of other relevant organization meetings were closely examined for the purpose of identifying persons providing leadership to the areas of development of interest to the regional research group (i.e., economic development, development of health related services and programs, and development of community facilities).

2) Once identified, these visible leaders were interviewed. In the discussions, each was asked to name other individuals with whom they were in contact and who contacted them in regard to the substantive areas under review.

3) Persons receiving multiple nominations as influentials by the visible leaders were subsequently interviewed.

Suwannee County's Strengths

Each community leader was asked to indicate the three things he or she liked most about Suwannee County. While this resulted in a wide variety of responses, four strengths of the county emerged consistently (see Table 8).

Relationshps with and attitudes towards fellow residents was the most cherished strength of the county. Nearly 89% of the local leaders felt that the comradery existing among the people truly helped generate a strong sense of "community spirit" in Suwannee County.

Table 8: Leaders' Perceptions of Suwannee County's Strengths

	Number of Mentions	Percent of all leaders (n=36)
Relationships and Attitudes	32	88.9
Quality of Life	25	69.0
Geography and Climate	14	38.9
Economic Potential	9	25.0

Sixty-nine percent of the community leaders (n=25) felt that the quality of life offered in the county was a major attraction. The healthy environment for raising children, the clean water and air, as well as the slow-pace life of a rural area, were all viewed as advantages of residing in the county.

The mild climate and the general geographic features of the county (i.e., lakes, river, countryside) were highlighted as strengths by 14 of the 36 leaders interviewed. Lastly, the economic potential of the county was perceived as an important asset of the locality. The availability of a skilled labor force and the county's accessibility to major transportation routes make it a viable location for many industrial firms.

Suwannee County's Needs

The thirty-six community leaders were also asked to indicate the three most important problems or needs confronting Suwannee County. The results are noted in Table 9.

The area of most concern to the leaders was the need for expansion of the county's economic base. There was a general awareness of the key role played

by agriculture in the maintenance of the county's economic health. Thus, they saw the need to attract non-agricultural type industries to the county in order to broaden its economic base.

Table 9: Leaders' Perceptions of Suwannee County's Needs

	Number of Mentions	Percent of all leaders (n=36)
Economic Growth	28	77.8
Recreation	14	38.9
Education	10	27.8
Health Services	8	22.2
Planning and Zoning	7	19.4
Housing	7	19.4

Recreation and education were identified as the second and third most important problems in the county. The limited recreational facilities for both young and old was viewed as a serious concern by 39% of the local leaders. Nearly 28% of them felt that improvements in the educational system (i.e. better facilities, improved and expanded curriculum) would go a long way in attracting small, clean industries to the area.

Ranking fourth in the needs of the county was the area of health-related services. This concern was expressed most often in connection with the need for additional doctors. Moreover, support was given to the expansion of health facilities in order to lessen the county's dependence on adjacent urban areas for the provision of health care.

Planning and zoning, as well as housing, were seen as the two final concerns of the community leaders. With respect of the former, nearly 20% of the leaders felt that the lack of an enforced zoning ordinance in the whole county was contributing to poor residential planning. As for the latter, seven leaders indicated the need for available housing for renting or purchasing. They believed that a good housing market would serve to attract medical physicians and industries to the county.

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